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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of MTV (Music Television Network) videos as "condensed mythologies" in a college English composition class. A videotape consisting of several "classic" videos was shown to the class over a period of three days, and each video was discussed. Handouts of song lyrics were provided for student reference and a copy of the videotape was placed on reserve at the library. Initially the instructor led the discussion, but by mid-class on the first day students were able to find and explore themes and cultural implications with less direction. The students were asked to choose one or two videos and write a paper describing the videos, translating the visual and musical images into language, and to analyze the underlying themes and cultural values. Peer evaluation workshops were held. The assignment was intended to reveal to students that videos are created to speak to an audience, whether the audience is intended to notice consciously the values embodied in them or not, and that the ability to analyze these texts increases the power to choose one's own values over those promoted by popular culture. Excerpts from students' final drafts are included. (DLS)

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MTV in the Composition Classroom

As Neil Postman observes, educators today remain focused on the question, "How can we use television to control education? They have not yet got to the question, How can we use education to control television?" He continues:

> It is an acknowledged task of the schools to assist the young in learning how to interpret the symbols of their culture. That this task should now require that they learn how to distance themselves from their forms of information is not so bizarre an enterprise that we cannot hope for its inclusion in the curriculum; even hope that it will be placed at the center of education. (162–63)

How might we apply Postman's urgent "call to arms" in our own college composition classes? The rationale for such application is clear. Too often popular media disable critical judgment. We turn on the television for entertainment, to escape from thought, and here lies its profound if subtle influence upon us. In the media, our values, our fears and desires, our self-images, all are invented, structured, given verbal or visual shape, and stylistically rendered in compelling colors, tones, and textures. In short, popular culture is a rhetoric persuading its audience of the absolute goodness and truth of its reigning ideology, but like the best rhetoric it disclaims its own artifice. Television, however, should be "read" with the same techniques of textual analysis and interpretation that we bring to our rhetoric and literature classes (see Goodwin; Gould; Fiske; Fiske and Hartely; McQuade

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and Atwan) and the crucial value to our students' lives of this kind of textual analysis can lead us to explore television in our writing classes.

Television, as Eric Gould notes, "condenses reality into its own mythology of what people and events are like" (187; see also Fiske): for classroom uses, what could be a more compact or more "condensed mythology" than a music video? Not only is a video a short and discrete unit that can be easily adapted to the time constraints of classroom viewing, but more importantly, music videos are teeming with (often antithetical) ideologies. No media event is culturally neutral: a video can pander to an audience's desires and fears or attempt to sustain current cultural values, though many video artists criticize current cultural values and thereby attempt to create new values instead. With such textual analyses of music videos as an inventive approach in the composition classroom, we can attempt to meet students in their own world; moreover, we may help students gain more control over the "symbols of their culture," to use Postman's phrase (163). A description of my own writing assignment sequence for second semester composition follows.

I first created a video tape consisting of several "classic" music videos selected for viewing in the classroom (and I placed a copy of the tape on reserve in the university's Media Center for students to review outside of class at will). This assignment can be done with any videos at random or with rented video anthologies, though I selected videos that I could analyze with the students and that offered a wide range of themes, values, and representations of artistic responsibility. While I wanted to prove that some artists create complex and responsible works of art, I did not want to ignore the fact that some video artists pander to the worst of their audiences' urges. (In this regard, see Joe Gow's "Relationship Between Sex and Violence"; Misty Anderson's "Justify My Desire"; and especially Marsha Kinder's "Battle of the Sexes on MTV": though longer and more

sophisticated, this last essay models the kind of analysis that can be attempted by students.) My tape included these music videos: "Bad" (Michael Jackson); "Faith" (George Michael); "Is This Love?" (Whitesnake); "U Got the Look" (Prince); "Big Time" and "Don't Give Up" (Peter Gabriel); "Koyaanisquatsi" (Philip Glass); "Wanted, Dead or Alive" (Bon Jovi); "Small Town" (John Cougar Mellencamp); and "Where the Streets Have No Name" (U2).

Our class spent three consecutive class days viewing the videos, discussing each one, and amassing a formidable amount of raw material for students' inventive processes. Handouts of song lyrics provided quotations for oral discussions and, later, for their papers; in addition, students knew in advance to take plenty of notes from our group talks, so that much of the invention stage of their papers could be shaped from class notes. Though I led students through the discussions for the first couple of videos, by mid-class on the first day students proved able to find and explore themes and cultural implications with less direction. I placed Michael Jackson's "Bad" first on the video tape, because it is explicitly a narrative—a story about a young man who returns to his ghetto home from prep school only to find his former friends reluctant to accept his newfound self-respect and unwillingness to commit robbery in order to be "bad" ("cool"). Initially, students were unable to look beyond the plot line to the deeper themes: the individual's need to assert personal integrity over peer pressure, and the insistence upon artistic expression as an alternative to crime (a "gang" dances together rather than mugs strangers).

By the close of the first class, students were pointing out the sexism in "Is This Love?" and describing Prince's deliberate decadence ("U Got the Look") that criticizes our cultural obsession with sexuality and appearances. And, by the end of the sequence, students were analyzing Bon Jovi's cowboy metaphor ("Wanted, Dead or Alive") and applying it to the visual images of the touring band

members' isolation and anxieties amid the bounty hunting of their ravenous fans. "Where the Streets Have No Name" is particularly interesting for analysis, given the fact that the video details a real event, U2's impromptu performance on a rooftop in San Francisco (offering a visual reference to The Beatles' London rooftop performances in their film, *Let It Be*), though in reality the police arrived to "pull the plug" after the performance was well underway, when crowds in the streets got out of hand. In the video, however, the police are shown deliberating and announcing they will stop the performance *before* the band then heroically rushes to perform this single song before the killjoy police literally "pull the plug" on their sound system. Asked how such a switch in chronology affects the video's message, students argued that the video portrays U2 as a rebellious, iconoclastic band that disobeys police orders for the sake of public rights and for the good of their impoverished fans in the inner city. Students had not expected to be able to "read" videos as thoroughly as they learned to do, and more than one student reported that watching music television began to take on new dimensions for them. They had learned to find texts worth analyzing in the most unexpected of places, and they had learned, too, that they were capable of quite sophisticated textual analyses.

The writing assignment handout asked students to choose one or two videos to analyze. I asked that, if a student wrote about a video not included on our class tape, the student would notify me (and I would ask the student to provide a taped version of the music video for me to watch, along with the paper, if it were one I had not seen); this allowed students the freedom to choose as they pleased, but it also protected me from reading papers about music videos I had not previewed or could not find on television. The assigned task was (1) to describe the video, that is, translate into language the visual and musical images that form its "text"; and (2) to analyze the underlying themes and cultural values. Students divided into groups to do some impromptu brainstorming, then we

reconvened as a class to explore further invention—which videos could be paired effectively? Which videos could bear having an entire paper devoted to them? Many students chose to analyze two contrasting videos, such as Glass's critique of American urban malaise in "Koyaanisquatsi" *versus* John Cougar Mellencamp's celebration of traditional family values in "Small Town." Other comparisons and contrasts were suggested between "Big Time" and "Don't Give Up"; "Is This Love?" and "U Got the Look"; "Bad" and "Where the Streets Have No Name." Students who decided to explore their own favorites not included in the class demonstration told the class some details they might include in their papers, proving that they could apply outside the classroom the analytic techniques we had covered.

After drafts had been produced, I attempted to direct the early workshops by pairing writers who were not working with the same videos. Later in the workshop sequence, however, students may be grouped into "panels" to evaluate the polished drafts of students not included in the panel group, or volunteers may distribute copies of drafts for an all-class workshop. In any case, the workshops were directed with questions constructed to point peer evaluators toward typical "trouble spots" in these papers: (1) Does the paper contain a detailed description or summary of the video (presenting visual and verbal elements to the extent necessary), in case the reader has not seen this particular video? (2) Does the paper contain significant analysis beyond summary—that is, does the student explore connections between this video and specific values in our culture?

The final drafts displayed a wide range of approaches, some of which will be excerpted here to demonstrate the kinds of analyses students can generate. One student chose to analyze a video not covered in class, "The Wall" by Pink Floyd:

> Pink Floyd's video anthology, *The Wall*, shows us a glimpse of what could happen to us if we continue to live in a mindless and robot-like fashion. Ours is a society that can never get enough, one that will turn to any device to obtain the materialism it wants. Pink Floyd urges us to "tear down the wall" before it is too late, and the last scene of the movie does, in fact, show the destruction of the wall. As the smoke clears, we are faced with children picking up the debris. A reminder of what we once were, these children are unharmed and untainted by the evils of the world. We are urged to stop before we start, to look at what we will become if we conform to society's driving ambitions, if we let the outside world control us.

Another student's paper examined the irresponsibility of Whitesnake's video, "Is This Love?" and warned of its possible effects upon young viewers:

> Violence, though not predominant in the video, is a noticeable undercurrent of "Is This Love?" and the malice is directed toward the woman in the video. When the lead singer realizes that his woman is leaving, he violently confronts and restrains her, clearly showing his dominance and her submission. This seemingly insignificant ending to the video provokes an answer to the song's repeated question: no, love is clearly not the story here. Women are shown as mere objects, and when we can't have the things we want, according to the video, we take what we want, maliciously if necessary. This video strongly insinuates that there is a superficial simplicity to life. Repeatedly, we see either the band, its cars, or the dominated woman; thus, rock

> music, cars, and women are depicted as the only significant aspects of life. When life does not unfold in the simplistic way preached by this video, however, will the brainwashed viewer resort to the same escape mechanism as the performers do, that is, physical aggression?

A majority of students chose to compare the two videos by Peter Gabriel, perhaps because both videos address issues crucial to these students' own anxious search for careers and material "success." Excerpts from two papers display the fine contrast set up by these two videos and the poignant message achieved by juxtaposing "Big Time" and "Don't Give Up":

> Behind the lyrics lies a deeper meaning of the "Big Time." Gabriel's character tells us that he is from a town where the people "think so small, they use small words," and yet as he disassociates himself from that world, his head is grossly larger than his body in the animated portrayal of his venture to the city, signifying that his ambitions are out of proportion with reality. Without delay he becomes engrossed with "BIG" everything—BIG God, BIG church, BIG heaven, parties with BIG names. Life is one BIG adventure. A quick screenful of bills and coins flashes across the picture like a subliminal message; his house, his cars, and finally his eyes enlarge, the latter revealing how susceptible human nature is to avarice and greed. Where is the limit? Why can't we have it all? Comically, Ritz crackers appear behind Gabriel's head as he sings of his newly acquired life of luxury, his vain efforts to "put on the ritz." But

as picturesque as the "Big Time" appears, it is actually a grim existence. Toward the end of the video, Gabriel invites us to "look at my circumstance." Behind his head is a chainsaw blade rotating forebodingly. His downfall is foreshadowed as fighter planes and bullets shower down, demolishing his protective glass encasement piece by piece. Despite the pomp of his lifestyle, he really has nothing, for when the material possessions are removed, he stands alone, destroyed by his own false sense of power.

A second student essay on Gabriel's videos is equally insightful:

To contrast "Big Time," Gabriel's next video—a duet with Kate Bush entitled "Don't Give Up"—replaces chaotic animation with simple visuals and strong symbolism. The song explores the meaning of success through the experiences of two people— a man "whose dreams have all deserted," who believes "no one wants you when you lose," and a woman who reminds him "don't give up, cause we're proud of who you are." Visually, Gabriel relies on symbolism to represent the emotional transformation from failure and insecurity to hope and confidence. The video shows the couple embracing on top of a hill as the sun behind them travels through the stages of a total eclipse. As the man plunges deeper into his depression, the sun also loses its radiance as it is engulfed by the moon and its shadow. For a moment all is dark and uncertain. Then the haunting rhythms of the music lift to the chorus as the woman reevaluates the meaning of success and the sun's rays escape the moon's

circumference and create a heavenly eclipse. Inspired and hopeful, the man has survived his dark night.

Through these two videos Gabriel explicitly tells us a story of a man who defined success as our society so often tells us to, by one's fame and fortune, only to lose it and feel that he had lost his soul. In "Big Time," Gabriel raises the question of what it means to be truly successful, and he answers it emphatically in the later video: we must determine success not by material objects, power, or fame, but by our relationships, our hope, and our willingness to survive our failures in the external world.

Of course, the analysis of music videos can be incorporated into a larger analysis of media in popular culture. Thus, such essays as excerpted above may be expanded and further documented as part of a larger research assignment: some diligent searching through current journals and magazines can turn up interesting and significant arguments on both sides of the issue of merit in music television (see Brown and Campbell; Goodwin; Frith; Pettegrew; Wells; and Gow, "Making Sense"; in addition, composition instructors who want to incorporate media analysis may find useful pedagogical material in Gould; McQuade and Atwan; and Comprone's still useful "Media in Teaching Composition.")

When I first began this assignment sequence, many students were wildly excited about the prospect of watching MTV in their English classes. Some students, by the way, were not so enthusiastic, complaining that they did not watch music television at home and fearing that they would be at a disadvantage among their fellow classmates. I am convinced, however, that even the

most avid MTV fan does not normally analyze the visual and musical texts. Actually, I found that the non-fans gave themselves most freely to the assignment, in the long run. Older students, some of them parents themselves, also approached this assignment warily but eventually found that the assignment was equally difficult and valuable for all. In fact, one parent commented later that the assignment sequence had helped her communicate better with her son, for she had learned that instead of forbidding his watching MTV she could teach him how to "read" videos and to discriminate among them. Perhaps the most significant discovery students can make in such an assignment is the essential rhetorical nature of music television: videos are created to speak to an audience, whether the audience is intended to notice consciously the values embodied in them or not, and our ability to analyze these texts increases our power to choose our own values over and perhaps against those urged upon us by popular culture.

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